History and Symbology of the Fasces

by Massimiliano Vittori

From the seventh century BC to 1943

Positive law derives to a large extent from religious norms, from a sacral conception of law, as the emanation of the divine will or its implementation. The first written drafting of norms, known as the Law of the XII Tables, in Rome, falls, according to tradition, in the years 451-450 BC. The ancients extol it as a general and complete codification of Roman public and private law; Livy (III, 34) identifies it as the "*fons omnis publiciprivatique iuris*" and Cicero (Orationes, I, 43) affirms that it embraces "*totam civile scientiam*". Failure to comply with the rules of conduct, which the State imposes for the achievement of common goals, entails the penalty, the sanction. Thus in Rome the fasces was introduced, symbol of state power and justice (punishing and reparative), insignia and sacral instrument of the coercive power of the Roman magistrates (power that was asserted with the penalty of flogging and beheading); superior, therefore, to the contingencies and passions of life. The bundle (fascis) - *insignia imperii* - was composed of a set of 12 elm or birch rods, about 150 cm long, held together by red leather straps (symbol of courage and love), in which it was inserted, sideways or above, an ax. It was carried on the left shoulder by lictors (lat. Lictor, perhaps from licére, "to sue"), who were subordinate officers in the service of the Roman magistrates and some priests. The lictors were always escorting their magistrate and when he went out in public they preceded him. The Roman fasces derives from the fasces of the Etruscan dodecapolis (7th century BC), as evidenced by the discovery of the tomb of the lictor in Vetulonia in 1898 thanks to the archaeologist Isidoro Falchi. Many signs of the Etruscan civilization, moreover, are found in Rome, starting with the Capitoline she-wolf, cast in bronze by architects of the Vulci school in Veio.

The story of the Etruscan beam with a double ax in the center above it is also the revealing emblem, through the millennia, of that original solar civilization that gathers in the sign of the lictorium a series of similar peoples and civilizations, marked by the same symbols and cults. This is the case of the Cretan-Mycenaean or pre-Hellenic civilization, which had Crete as its center before 1000 BC; so much so that the palace of Knossos was indicated in later legends with the name of the Labrys building, a word that in the ancient Asian dialects means "two-winged". The double-pole, moreover, a symbol of divine power, therefore of supreme justice, was the attribute of a supreme god, predecessor of the Zeus of the Greeks, of Tinia of the Etruscans, of Jupiter of the Romans. But also in Rome, everything that can be traced back to rituality and symbolism appears inseparable from every institution and every manifestation of life, both individual and collective. For this reason, some central events in the history of Rome are born with the hope of the twelve fundamental signs or sacred series (the number twelve in traditional symbolism embodies completeness and perfection): Romulus founded Rome after seeing twelve vultures in flight on the Palatine hill ; to him we owe, almost certainly, the institution of twelve lictors belonging to the king. There are also twelve ancilia or sacred shields that Numa Pompilius hid in his palace (the oracles had predicted that the ancestral destiny of power of the eternal city was linked) and twelve, like the Greek ones, are the greatest Roman gods. In republican Rome, the

custom was established, in recognition of popular sovereignty, of removing the axes from the bundles within the city, since here the power of the magistrate (ius necis) was limited by the right of appeal to the people (provocatio) and before the 'popular assembly, in recognition of his sovereignty, the magistrate lowered the bundles which, precisely because of their high significance, were broken when there was the infamy of the dismissal of a magistrate or when there was the shame of a defeat or an internal discord. The bundles of a victorious republican magistrate and acclaimed imperator were crowned with laurel branches.

In the modern age, the symbol of the Roman beam reappears at the end of the 18th century in some noble coats of arms and business cards as an allegory of authority and justice. With the French Revolution, the fasces returned to be commonly depicted according to republican, anti-monarchical and anticlerical iconography. During the days of Terror, the main meaning that was attributed to the fasces was that of popular authority and sovereignty, which in exceptional times promulgates exceptional laws, decides on the life and death of men in the name of res publica and rediscovered freedom. So the republican fasces in some way contains in its symbolism those ideals of human redemption (liberté, egalité, fraternité) that the French Republic intended to embody by means of the revolution, against any form of reactionary absolutism. Ideals that will sanction the birth of the modern concept of state or nation and the birth of the real political era. In some ways, this symbol of justice represents a sort of witness to the radical turning point that allowed humanity to arrive at the contemporary age, through the affirmation of independence of thought and ideals, through the vindication of the individual right to freely create for himself the legislation of his own activity and life. During the Risorgimento uprisings the fasces sometimes appear with an explicit reference to the ideals of the French Revolution, in the sense, therefore, of aspiration for national unity and freedom, or as an affirmation of the republican ideal as opposed to the monarchy and the papacy, but above all as an affirmation of the popular will against any form of restoration. And in Mazzinian thought those mystical intentions must be recognized, which will be typical of political movements having characteristics of secular religiosity. Mazzini, in fact, conceived life as a mission, as an aspiration to the conquest of freedom; freedom of the individual in the freedom of the people. The problem of the Italian Risorgimento, according to Mazzini, was fundamentally an ethical and religious problem, and only the inspiration for a universal ideal could shape the soul of the people and guarantee a solid basis for political authority and the life of the state. The beam reappeared "in the ephemeral light" of the Roman Republic, first in 1799 and then in 1848-1849, as the sacred banner of the rediscovered freedom. With decree n. 54 of February 22, 1849, issued by the Constituent Assembly, the Triumvirate included it in the emblem of the state: "The coat of arms of the Roman Republic will have an eagle surrounded by a civic crown in the middle, and the consular beams in its claws. The bond of the consular bundles will form a falling bandage, which will have the motto: Law and Strength ".

In times closer to us, the fasces reappears as the symbol of fascism, at the time of the establishment of the Combattimento Fasci, on 23 March 1919 in Piazza San Sepolcro in Milan. Initially the fascist movement used the symbol of the fasces in the republican style, to emphasize its national conception of Risorgimento derivation. According to Mussolini, what distinguished the fascist movement from other parties was not the political program but the animating spirit, that is, faith, which was the right and

duty of the fascists to defend the reasons for interventionism. On those reasons and on those convictions the Fascists had built their new ecclesia, which included rituals and celebrations typical of a modern secular liturgy, equipped with its own armed militia, capable of defending and affirming the values of that faith. Central to the history of fascism and its subsequent evolution in a totalitarian sense is the passage that transformed the movement into a party, in the course of 1921, the year in which fascism entered parliament. 1921 is the year of his systematic organization on a provincial and local basis by means of a more orderly military and trade union structure and also represents the year of his approach to the monarchy and the papacy.

The “cult of the lictorian” was institutionalized by means of the royal legislative decree n. 2061 of 12 December 1926, with which the bundle became the emblem of the state and in practice the definitive interpenetration (up to the identification) of fascism in the state was established. The decree also prescribed the official shape, consisting of a bundle of rods and an ax, joined together by a belt or a rope; the ax was placed on the side with the blade facing outwards. The transformation of fascism, from a revolutionary movement into a "restorer of national values" party, found a symptomatic adaptation also in the iconographic modification of its symbol, which, by order of Mussolini himself (as proof of his obsessive attention even to sometimes insignificant details), had to to relate faithfully to the symbol of the Roman lictory, excluding all the other meanings that the lictorium of a different shape could evoke. The symbol of the republican bundle was temporarily set aside, depicted in the posters and official postcards of the PNF up to the political elections of 1924. Since the fascist regime had sanctified this symbol of the new era, whose intimate value now ranged from tradition to current events and embraced every aspect of social life, including public works carried out by fascism, with a subsequent legislative decree, n. 2273 of December 30, 1926, a specific prohibition was imposed on the reproduction, sale, distribution and trivialization of the badges and insignia that depicted the emblem of the fasces and subsequently it was ordered that it should appear in front of the buildings of the municipalities, provinces, congregations of charities and parastatal bodies, as well as in their official acts. With a subsequent decree law, no. 504 of 11 April 1929, the fasces were also inserted in the shape of the coat of arms and seal of the State.

The fascist regime, already shaky due to the predictable outcome of the Second World War, collapsed on 25 July 1943, following an act that we could define as "internal democracy". The supreme organ of the regime, the Grand Council of Fascism, on the initiative of some hierarchs (Grandi, Bottai, Federzoni, Ciano and De Marsico), voted no confidence in Mussolini. The agenda signed by Dino Grandi passed with nineteen votes in favor, seven against, one abstention. Mussolini was dismissed by the king and imprisoned in the late afternoon of 25 July.

Already during the day of the 26th the crowd took to the streets in the major cities to tear down the symbols of the lictorium from the facades of public buildings. This iconoclastic fury was followed by the Rdl. 2 August 1943, n. 704, which sanctioned the suppression of the National Fascist Party. But the day after September 8, with the liberation of Mussolini on the Gran Sasso, the fascists began to reorganize themselves to give life to the Italian Social Republic in the Center-North of Italy. On September 24, 1943, in the first session of the Council of Ministers, among other things, it was established that: "The flag of the RSI is tricolor with the Republican beam on the tip of the pole; the combat flag for the armed forces is the tricolor with a frieze and marginal

fringe of laurel and at the four corners the republican beam, a grenade, an anchor and an eagle ". The following 30 September the characteristics of the new party badge were made known, which provided for the fasces in its republican style. This, symbolically, meant a return to the origins, to antemarcia fascism. Mussolini himself, in the Munich speech of the previous September 18, had reiterated the postulates of 1919: republic and socialization, a reference to Mazzini as apostle of the unity of Italy. During the short period of CSR, the reference to the Risorgimento and to the unity of the homeland, betrayed by the monarchy, on which the responsibility for the defeat and the ongoing civil war was thrown, were arguments that found fertile ground, especially among the most ideologized young people, since the cult of the homeland had been one of the most recurring reasons during the twenty years.

Since then, in Italy, the symbol of the fasces has not been used anymore, because it is outlawed, as established by the provisions of the XII provision, transitory and final, of the Constitution of the Italian Republic and of the law of 20 June 1952, n. 645, better known as the “Scelba Law”.

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